The Great Crossroads of Civil Liberties

Globalization, Demography, and the Unforeseen Limits of the Liberal Settlement

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ESSAY

A conception of liberty that cannot defend the conditions of its own existence risks becoming the mechanism of its disappearance.

A Settlement Born Under Specific Conditions

Modern civil liberties did not emerge in the abstract, nor were they conceived for every imaginable historical context. They took shape in Europe after conflicts among Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian factions: populations that were deeply divided politically and religiously, yet still situated within the same civilizational space, with relatively high degrees of cultural, ethnic, legal, and social continuity.

The liberal settlement was therefore created to make coexistence possible among individuals and groups that disagreed profoundly, but still belonged to a political body understood as more or less bounded and enduring. Its founders could think in terms of religious tolerance, freedom of conscience, equality before the law, and limits on state power. What they could hardly have anticipated was a globalized world in which hundreds of millions of people could move between continents, with such movement being materially possible, legally tolerated, and morally protected by an expansive interpretation of human rights.

This does not mean that civil liberties were a mistake. It means that they were conceived under historical conditions that may disappear, and that, when mechanically applied to radically different circumstances, they may produce effects contrary to those that originally justified them.

Finite Societies, Undefined Pressure

The central problem is that receiving societies are finite. Territory is finite, housing is finite, public services are finite, fiscal resources are finite, integration capacity is finite, and so is the willingness of a population to absorb indefinitely the material and cultural costs of transformations it has not consciously chosen.

By contrast, the potential scale of migratory pressure has no politically defined limit. There is no predetermined maximum, no final figure beyond which European institutions declare that the process is complete or can go no further. There is talk of managing flows, redistributing migrants, regularizing legal status, or creating legal pathways, but there is no public, binding, and credible plan that answers the fundamental question: how many more people may arrive, and at what point will a country’s capacity be considered exhausted?

The consequence of this absence of limits is that many millions more may attempt to arrive. No conspiracy needs to be assumed. For an individual living in a poor, insecure, or overpopulated society, migration to a wealthier country may be a perfectly rational decision. Yet the sum of millions of individually rational decisions may generate a collectively destructive outcome for the lower and middle classes of receiving countries.

Individual Rationality and Collective Cost

Those who first bear the burden of competition for housing, low-paid work, welfare provision, public space, schools, and healthcare are not the elites who defend openness in the abstract, but the social groups already living in more precarious conditions. People who are legitimately trying to improve their own lives may therefore end up doing so, objectively, at the expense of others who also have rights, roots, and needs, but who are no longer treated as politically prior within their own country.

A fundamental contradiction emerges here: universal rights are presented as though they could be exercised over unlimited resources, while the real costs of applying them fall on specific communities and on goods that are necessarily scarce. Moral universality does not abolish material finitude.

Emigration as a Possible Instrument of State Interest

To this spontaneous dynamic must be added a second possibility, one that cannot simply be dismissed because it has not yet materialized explicitly: large demographic states may come to view mass emigration as an instrument of national interest.

It is not necessary to claim that such a coordinated strategy already exists. It is enough to observe that it could be rational. A state with an enormous, growing, and young population may benefit from emigration: it reduces internal social pressure, receives remittances, expands its diaspora, strengthens transnational networks of influence, and may eventually acquire indirect leverage over the political decisions of other countries.

In a democracy, demography ultimately has political consequences. Residents become citizens; citizens vote; large groups acquire electoral, institutional, and cultural power. Therefore, if a process is rational for individuals, potentially advantageous for states of origin, and legally permitted by receiving states, there is no sound reason to assume that it will never be used politically.

The argument is not that everything rational must inevitably occur. It is that anything rational, advantageous, and not effectively prevented has a significant probability of eventually being attempted by some actor. A responsible political system cannot merely hope that no one will exploit its vulnerabilities. It must anticipate them before they become irreversible facts.

Demography, the Demos, and Political Continuity

This possibility is especially important because contemporary liberalism continues to think about rights as though the political body were stable, precisely when it no longer guarantees that stability. Individual rights of entry, residence, family reunification, and naturalization are protected, while the collective right of a historical community to preserve its demographic, cultural, and political continuity is not formulated with equal clarity.

This is where the civil settlement may begin to break down. Civility does not exist independently of material conditions. When a growing part of the population believes that it is losing access to housing, security, purchasing power, public services, cultural continuity, and the ability to decide the future of its own country, trust in institutions declines. Under conditions of precarity, uprootedness, and distributive conflict, abstract appeals to liberal principles may no longer be sufficient.

A population cannot be expected to remain moderate indefinitely while its institutions refuse to establish limits. The civil settlement presupposes reciprocity, belonging, and the belief that the rules also protect those who already form part of the community. Once that belief disappears, there is no guarantee that civility will survive.

The Limit Ultimately Set by Faits Accomplis

The question, therefore, is not merely how much immigration can be economically absorbed today. The deeper question is whether liberal democracies possess any mechanism capable of determining who constitutes the demos, what continuity it should preserve, and what limit cannot be crossed without irreversibly transforming the political subject that created those liberties in the first place.

At present, no clear answer exists. And the absence of an answer is not neutral: in a cumulative process, refusing to define a limit means allowing that limit to be determined by faits accomplis.

Civil liberties may have been created to protect society against arbitrary power. But unless they are adapted to new historical conditions, they may end up preventing that same society from preserving itself. A conception of liberty that makes it impossible to defend the conditions upon which liberty depends risks becoming the mechanism of its own disappearance.